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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF THE ENVIRONMENT ANNOUNCES INITIATIVE  
TO STABILIZE GALAPAGOS NATIONAL PARK

REF: QUITO 2599

1. Summary. The Minister of the Environment (MOE), Fabian Valdivieso, announced to the press on September 27 that Fausto Cepeda had been replaced as Galapagos National Park (GNP) Director by GNP employee Victor Carrion. The MOE will form a commission to oversee any future selections of the GNP Director, and will sign work contracts with all GNP employees to stabilize the park as an institution. The MOE's decision pleased GNP employees, NGOs and donors. The leader of the fishermen, however, publicly derided the MOE's decision on September 28 but did not call for any retaliatory action. The Embassy is actively promoting an independent commission that is transparent and politically neutral. End Summary.

The MOE Cans Cepeda, Installs Interim Director  
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2. The GNP strikers waited over the weekend to resume talks with Minister of the Environment on September 27. Throughout the weekend, rumors swirled that Cepeda would be ousted for his role in the violence at the park (Reftel) and an interim director named. On Monday, the MOE confirmed the rumors that Cepeda was out and Victor Carrion (a current mid-level functionary at the GNP) was in for at least two months, during which time a commission would be established to pick all future park directors. The MOE also agreed to provide work contracts to all the GNP employees to bolster institutional stability.

3. The announcement was well received by the striking employees, NGOs, and donors, all of which pushed for these measures to ensure institutional stability in the GNP. However, the decision angered the fishing sector, to which Cepeda was a favorite son. Rogelio Guaycha, President of four fishing cooperatives and alternate congressional deputy, wasted no time scorning the decision. The following morning he was on local radio deriding international groups for meddling in Ecuador's affairs and calling this decision an encroachment on Ecuador's sovereignty. He has not yet called on the fishermen to march on the GNP and commandeer the park, as some suspected he would.

4. The striking employees did not gloat over their victory and agreed not to go to work the following day, September 28, to avoid provoking the fishermen. Twenty armed policemen were stationed at the gates of the GNP to maintain control of the park.

The MOE Convores Donor Meeting  
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5. The MOE invited donors to a meeting at the Ministry of the Environment on September 28. He laid out his vision of the process to form the commission. The MOE noted specifically that the process should be led by the Ministry of the Environment, and requested donors maintain a low profile. To that end, the MOE agreed to collaborate on a communication strategy to inform the public and maintain the necessary transparency to prevent political interference.

6. The MOE hoped to have a permanent GNP Director in place by January 1, 2005. He asked for assistance from the donor groups to achieve this goal. USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offered technical assistance. They agreed that one international and local consultant should be hired to provide the needed technical know-how. The donors agreed to suggest qualified consultants from their respective pools of technical assistants. The MOE requested another meeting on October 1.

Comment  
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7. The removal of Cepeda is clearly intended to defuse the strike and continuing political uproar caused by the removal of the previous director, Edwin Naula, who was reportedly an ally of the main opposition Social Christian Party. The naming of Cepeda was intended to assure the loyalty to the government of an independent Congressional deputy representing the Galapagos, Vinicio Andrade, who is allied to Galapagos fishing interests. It is unclear how the removal

of Cepeda will affect President Gutierrez's fortunes in an increasingly hostile Congress.

18. Victor Carrion is a Galapagos native who has a reputation for being steady and apolitical. While the fishermen were upset about Cepeda's ousting, they never quite called for Carrion's head on a platter. Mission Ecuador will encourage the parties to respect the truce at least long enough to permit the proposed commission to be formed and make its recommendation. We are promoting an independent commission that is transparent and politically neutral. Such a commission could prove to be the solution to the politicization of the GNP Directorship under the Gutierrez administration and return stable management to the Galapagos.

KENNEY